

THRILLING AND TRUE

REMARKABLE EPISODE OF THE WAR

How Two Young Confederate Officers of the District of Columbia Were Hanged as Spies—General Garfield Orders Their Execution

From the "United Service" for March.

The pages of history are full of surprises. They fully justify the old proverb "Truth is stranger than fiction." Nothing is more wonderful than the romance of reality. The more we know of the past, the more we are furnished another illustration of the truth of these suggestions. They would doubtless have been published several years ago but for the efforts of the confederate army, which, in order to save them, and to put in circulation copies to suppress them, and to furnish a narrative, may be said to have been the cause of their publication. Their archives, which contain a history of the army, and execution, as spies, of Colonel William Orton Williams and Lieutenant Walter G. Peter, of the confederate army, in the month of June, 1864, taken, as I am informed, out of deference to the wishes and feelings of relatives and friends, many of whom remain loyal to their country and Government, and who are now in the hands of the enemy, indeed, held prominent positions in the army of the United States. Seventeen years have elapsed, however that these unhappy events took place, and, as time assuages our griefs and recollections of the past, and the Providence, and as some of the parties most deeply interested are no longer living, I have deemed it proper to avail myself of the facts and papers in my possession on the subject by giving them to my readers for their

time that these facts should be made known, it order that the responsibility for the sad catastrophe and the unfortunate fate of these men should be placed where it properly belongs.

THE STORY OF MAJOR ANDRE

IS familiar to the readers of English history, even to a casual reader of the world, for one hundred years ago, in the month of June, 1792, a Frenchman, with his untimely end had been, for the first time, often with throbbing hearts and eyes brimming with tears, and yet the interest felt in the fate of that gallant officer is apparently as great now as it was on that day of October, 1796, when he was led to the guillotine at the foot of the Bastille, in Washington military. Military authorities on both sides of the Atlantic have almost universally conceded the propriety of the action taken by Washington in that matter; but there have been many of his countrymen who have been disposed to excuse for the illustrious patriot who have been greater if he had mitigated in some legitimate way the severity of that painful sentence. Few, indeed, of his contemporaries, or who at that time debated so warlike questions, or the demerits of that course, could have treated the subject with the same candor, and to be more precise, on the 9th day of June, 1861, a lineal descendant of George Washington should have perished in the same ignominious way, under circumstances which present, to say the least, a strong contrast to the sentence; yet such was the fact, and Colonel William O'Brien, who was the chief conspirator, and, yet, victim in the awful tragedy, taking with him in the crime and its punishment a cousin, named Walter George, also of Georgetown, in the District of Columbia.

COLONEL WILLIAMS WAS THE SON

of Captain William G. Williams, who was for twenty-two years a well-known officer of the topographical engineers of the United States army.

and who were morally attached to the cause of the American people. During the Mexican war, on the 23d day of September, 1866, Captain Williams was born in the city of Philadelphia, of English parents, of whom he was taken to England, and for a time sent to school at Exeter; but, having a strong desire to return to America, his father brought him back and placed him in an educational institution in Kentucky. Here the youth developed such strong military and athletic propensities, that at a cadetship at West Point was secured for him in the year 1884. After pursuing his studies at the Military Academy for two years, he obtained leave of absence, and, going to France, he entered the Polytechnic School of Paris, where he remained two years, when he returned to West Point, and in two years more completed his course at that insti-

A man of remarkable proficiency in many branches of learning, was a poet and painter of no inconsiderable merit, and in other respects was greatly accomplished. He was at the same time devoted to his profession, and was a most efficient and successful physician. He was also a writer, and an overbearing in his manner, and was consequently unpopular with his brother officers and fellow-soldiers.

His Distinguished Gallantry

and bravery, however, at the battle of Monterey were conspicuous. He saved a multitude of soldiers, and his death was greatly lamented. As an engineer officer he had served in the Cherokee country; at Charleston, S. C.; on the Niagara frontier, and in other localities within the limits of our country. Many years before his death he had married Miss Columbia Peters, the daughter of Thomas Peters, who was, in the early part of the present century, a prominent citizen of Georgetown, a large property-owner in the District of Columbia, and one of the intimate personal friends of George Washington. His only daughter married Martha Parker Custis, who was a grandchild of Mrs. George Washington, and long resided in Georgetown, where, in the year 1801, he built the old mansion now occupied by Mr. Kennon, the son of the late General. He was a native of the United States navy, who, among others, was killed on board the Princeton by the explosion of a gun, in the year 1848. Mrs. Kennon is also a daughter of Thomas Peters and a sister of Mrs. Captain Williams.

ONE OF THE FRUITS OF THE MARSHES

of Captain Williams and Miss Peters was a son, born on the 7th day of July, 1837, named William Horton Williams, who became the leading actor in the deplorable train of events about to be related.

ters of G. W. P. Custis, the former owner of the Arlington estate and the father of Mrs. Robert E.

It will thus be seen that W. O. Williams was the direct and literal descendant of Mrs. George Washington Williams, the daughter of the late John Williams. With Williams was associated a cousin, Walter Gibson Peter (a grandson of Major George Peter, the brother of Thomas Peter, who was born in 1770, and died in 1840), who was born in 1820, and was the son of a Virginia gentleman. These boys together had formed for Williams a most devoted and romantic attachment. In personal graces and accomplishments Williams often recalled his great resemblance to his father, and his father's father, the late General Peter, who, having had considerable skill as a painter, but being thoroughly devoted to the military profession. While pursuing his academic studies

AT ALEXANDRIA, VA.

his greatest pleasure was in assembling the members of the school, organizing them into companies, and in drilling them in the tactics of the day. He wished very much to go West Point, but an elder brother, who subsequently became a distinguished officer in the United States Army, was already there, and he failed to secure the coveted appointment as a cadet. After completing his studies he was employed for a time in the service of the Coast Survey, but his military inclinations were so strong that he resigned, and, through the assistance of friends he obtained a commission as a lieutenant in the Second Cavalry Regiment of the United States army. Shortly after he was appointed a volunteer in the General's staff, and then commander-in-chief of the Cavalry, with headquarters at Washington city. This was in the early part of the year 1861, and the Southern threatnings in the Southern horizon were so menacing that the Government was obliged to go to war. In the war of the rebellion, Colonel Robert E. Lee was General Scott's chief of staff, and was also in duty at the War Department, in Washington. It was in the latter part of the year 1861 that Lieutenant Williams, a love affair was introduced, and caused the cause of the contest of events which ended so disastrously for both, and which led both to an infamous and shameful death on the scaffold. Williams was a gentleman generally devoted to the duties of his office.

THE DAUGHTER OF COLONEL ROBERT E. LEE.

who was then residing at Arlington. While on duty at Washington he made frequent visits to the young lady, both before and after Colonel Lee resigned his office, and he was very much attached to her. These visits came to the knowledge of General Scott and Assistant Adjutant-General Townsend, who were naturally apprehensive that these critical times, especially in the year 1861, would be a temptation to Williams might betray across the Potomac information of a valuable character to the conspirators in Virginia. They ordered him, therefore, to discontinue those visits, and he was obliged to do so. He was, however, and he continued to make clandestine visits to Arlington. This fact again coming to the knowledge of the officers above mentioned, the